

** as if live*

***Statement of Senator Harry Reid on Introduction of the
Southern Nevada Higher Education Land Act of 2009
May 1, 2009***

MR. REID: M. President, I rise today with my good friend Senator ENSIGN to introduce the Southern Nevada Higher Education Land Act of 2009. This bill will expand opportunities for higher education in one of the nation's fastest growing areas, southern Nevada.

In July 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Land Grant College Act into law, creating a higher education legacy that continues to benefit our country today. That bill, now referred to as the Morrill Act, provided 30,000 acres of federal land per member of Congress to establish institutions of higher education in each state. Today, thanks in large part to the foresight of Senator Justin Smith Morrill from Vermont and others from his time, this nation has one of the finest public university systems in the world.

Among the many universities established as a result of this forward-looking legislation was the University of Nevada. The state's first university was originally founded in Elko in 1874. Two years later, Nevada's state legislature voted to move the university to its current home in Reno. The University of Nevada remained the state's only higher education institution for 75 years.

From these humble beginnings, the state of Nevada has expanded its higher education system to now include two research universities, one state college, one research institution, and four community colleges. The Nevada System of Higher Education, which was formed in 1968 and encompasses all eight institutions, has grown to serve roughly 98,000 degree-seeking students.

As the state of Nevada continues to grow, so too must its university system. With over two million residents in 2007, greater Las Vegas is the fourth-largest metropolitan area in the Mountain West. In this decade alone, the area's population has grown by 31 percent, five times faster than the nation as a whole. By the year 2040, the area's population is projected to double to nearly 4.3 million residents. We must expand higher education opportunities to meet the demands of this growing region.

Consider the following – the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, with 28,000 students and 3,300 faculty and staff, is the fourth fastest-growing research university in the nation. The College of Southern Nevada, also in Las Vegas, serves 41,000 students and its three urban campuses are at near capacity. The town of Pahrump, 60 miles from Las Vegas in rural Nye County, has grown by 20 percent since 2000. Great Basin College's small branch campus in Pahrump uses high school classrooms at night to serve the city's 41,000 residents.

Our legislation will make selected parcels of federal lands available for the future growth of the university system. Land will be provided for new campuses for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas; the College of Southern Nevada; and a Pahrump campus of Great Basin College.

The current campuses for these three institutions comprise 1,150 acres in southern Nevada. With the passage of this legislation, an additional 2,400 acres will be available for new classroom, research, and residential facilities to help further the missions of these three fine institutions.

To establish these new campuses, three parcels of land would be conveyed from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to the Nevada System of Higher Education. Two of the parcels are located in Clark County, within the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA) disposal boundary. The third parcel is located in Pahrump, west of Las Vegas, in Nye County. BLM has designated all of these parcels for disposal because they are surrounded by development and are difficult to manage.

It is important to point out that the land our legislation conveys for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas borders Nellis Air Force Base. Nellis was once on the outskirts of town, but now development is on its doorstep. In order to protect the mission of the Nellis Air Force base, we have put a special provision in the legislation requiring that the university system and Air Force sign a common agreement regarding development plans for the campus before any land is conveyed. The through numerous conversations, the university system and the Air Force have found a middle ground that will serve the interests of both parties. We greatly appreciate the efforts of the university system and the Air Force to make this work.

This same land bordering Nellis was once used as a small arms range during World War II and will need to be cleaned up before it can be conveyed to the university system. Because it will take time to accomplish this, our legislation allows the land to be conveyed in phases, as the remediation is completed.

This proposal to expand higher education opportunities in southern Nevada has been welcomed by area leaders. City and county officials have worked closely with the Nevada System of Higher Education to plan the development of world-class facilities in their communities. These facilities are critical to meeting the challenge of diversifying their economies and attracting and growing knowledge industries in the area.

M. President, just as the Morrill Act opened up federal land to expand higher education across the nation, I am hopeful that this important, though much more modest effort can do the same for the residents of southern Nevada. We look forward to working with Chairman Bingaman, Ranking Member Domenici and the other distinguished members of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee to move this legislation in an expeditious manner.

I ask that the text of the bill be printed in the RECORD.